

[Women and Cards]

[Beliefs and customs?] — Folk Stuff

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Arnold Manoff

ADDRESS 27 Hamilton Terrace

DATE Sept. 27, 1938

SUBJECT FOLK-STUFF: WOMEN AND CARDS

1. Date and time of interview Sept. 24th 1938 in the early afternoon
2. Place of interview Neighborhood of 170th St and the Grand Concourse, Bronx.
(Informant wishes to remain anonymous. See interview sheet for explanation.
3. Name and address of informant Mr. and Mrs. R. Address as above.
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.
5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you
6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc. Three room apartment on street floor, modestly but well furnished. Neighborhood on and adjoining Concourse. All Yiddish

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population. Middle class psychology with slightly lower than middle class incomes. Highest rents on Concourse, 3 rooms 45 to 60 dollars. Rents off Concourse, 3 rooms, 35 to 42 dollars. Shopping district is 170 St. Many little businesses set up in ground floor apartments, spot this section. These are usually millinery shoppes, corset shoppes, beauty parlors, dress shoppes, one or two fur dealers, etc. Two cafeterias and a few restaurants. Baby carriages everywhere, particularly in front of the Automat around noontime. Automat has row of highchairs for infant patrons. Two movie houses, well attended. This neighborhood centering around 170th St. comprises an area of about 25 square blocks. To the South is a similar neighborhood centering around 167 St. To the North likewise, centering around 173 St or Mt. Eden Ave. Architecture is confined to five and six story red and tan brick [apartment?] houses 5 to 20 years old. The Concourse sports self service elevators in most of the houses. The side streets are generally walk ups. Political life is majority New Deal democrat. A good second American Labor Party. Communist Party runs third, Republican fourth and Socialist fifth. Political corner is at 170th St and Walton Ave. Here are held all the street meetings and here congregate the sidewalk philosophers and tacticians. Other points of unorganized get-to-gethers are the candy stores, where the unemployed pass the time playing pin ball games and gabbing. The two pool rooms are high class joints offering ping pong, ladies invited. A few bars down on Jerome Ave. This is not a heavy drinking section. The depression is not evident as a coloring factor to the casual observer. The clothes worn is uniformly good stuff, latest style. There are quite a number of relief cases in this area but relief recipients keep it quiet. It is not considered good taste to be on relief. The housewives play the numbers and many play poker of which more later. You can sit at any table in the Automat and hear an animated discussion concerning the numbers or last night's game. The small time gangsters, number runners, race track followers and the seven or eight well prostitutes, gather nightly in the Belmore cafeteria which stays open all night. The neighborhood as it is now is an outgrowth of the post war exodus of the Jewish population from the East side to the Bronx. Before the depression it was considered populated by upper middle class Jews incomes ranging from 5 to 15 thousand. Those who survived the crash gradually

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moved down to West End Ave and Riverside Drive when the rents began to go down and people of a lower income level began to move in. Any pre war reminiscences of this section are very difficult to find and mainly deal with discriptions of how everythings everything was all lots. There are still a few private houses wedged in between the aprtment houses. These are generally occupied by some sort of club political or fraternal. The Concourse is a sort of Doctor's alley. Every house has its ground floor occupied by at least one doctor. Some have five or six in one building. There are more doctors'shingles on and around the Concourse than any other neighborhood I have seen in New York. The talk is best described by saying that in accent and inflection it is a shade or two more American than Arthur Kobers caricatured Jews. As people however Odets has probably come closer than anyone in getting them down in his plays "Awake and Sing" and "Paradise Lost", although the realizations, that Odets' characters come to so quickly, take a hell of a lot longer and go through an endless escape process before arriving at fundamentals.

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NEW YORK

FORM B Personal History of Informant

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Arnold Manoff

ADDRESS 27 Hamilton Terrace

DATE Sept. 27, 1938

SUBJECT FOLK-STUFF: WOMEN AND CARDS

1. Ancestry Russo-Jewish

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2. Place and date of birth Russia some fifty years ago.

3. Family

4. Places lived in, with dates

5. Education, with dates

6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates

7. Special skills and interests

8. Community and religious activities

9. Description of informant Mrs. R is a lively stout woman around fifty years of age. She is a business woman; prefers not to have mentioned which business as she has given other material where anonymity was not desired. Mr. R. is a thin man of around fifty. Retired laundry man for reasons of health. Assists wife in her business doing odd jobs. Has a yen for any kind of machine. House has every kind of modern gadget for the kitchen. He is always interviewing salesman for typewriters, new types of vacuum cleaners, cheek writers of which he has two. Is now thinking of buying a piano accordion. His face has a boyish, stubborn look about it. Lights up when you ask about any one of his many gadgets. He is learning to use an English typewriter. Both talk English rather well but with pronounced accents.

10. Other Points gained in interview

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FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

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(Interview started with Mrs. R. Mr. R was in the same room laboriously pounding out addresses from Mrs. R.'s customer mailing list. They were sending out the customary Jewish New Year greetings.) Mrs. R The lights went out all over and you should see. The boys broke all the trees on the Concourse. I was here working. They bothered all the girls in the street. It was dark. They thought they had a chance now. R went to a card party. I'll bet he had fun when the lights went out. What did you do when the lights went out Mr. R? Mr. R. (laughing secretively) What do you think I did? Mrs. R. That's what he says. He didn't do nothing. Mr. R (still teasing) That's what you think. Collector to Mrs R I'm interested in the card games etc.etc. — (Mr. R looks up interestedly from his typing, is about to say something but Mrs. R beats him to the punch) Mrs. R That's something for a good article. The women and the cards. What do you want to know? About the kitty houses or the travelling games. But you shouldn't give my name if I tell you. My customers, some of them run kitty houses. How would it come out if they saw my name telling all their business? The kitty houses are the real ones. Travelling games you know a bunch of women they play in each others houses. A kitty house is already a regular business.

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A kitty house is where the woman where they play, she don't play. She gives food and service and charges admission. Yes, poker. Women in the afternoons., Men in the evenings. Regular furniture. Two three tables ten to a table. Yes I go sometimes, sometimes for business and sometimes frankly I'll tell you for pleasure, but I don't like

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to win money. I like better to lose a little bit and enjoy myself. R is already different. He has got to win. Otherwise it is very bad. I don't like when people get so excited and angry over a game. R goes all the time. He has a cousin. She runs a small kitty house. You got to be recommended. Sure they're afraid. But mostly they shmear here and there. Sure, you know, a little shmear. I suppose the cop gets his and he don't bother them. They have a chain on the door with a hole. They look you over first. Mr. R. he knows just how it works. (Mr. R gets up from the typewriter and stretches himself smiling wisely) Mr. R Listen you know what it means a kitty. When you play they put money from every deal in the kitty. Some houses they run it this way. They call it a buck game. Look I'll show you. (He takes a piece of paper and draws a circle) Here you see on every table is ten players. They make a circle in the middle of the table and then they make it like this. (He divides the circle into ten segments) Like this, you understand, one for each one who is playing. Now. So soon you win a pot, you put in a quarter for the house and the lady marks in your part of the circle a cross. When you got five crosses that's all for you. You are paid up for your admission and you don't have to give no more quarters. That's a big house already. In these houses they take sometime a dollare dollar for the girl who serves and some of them charge for electric. They give good food yes. Everything. Sandwiches, cooked stuff, herring, potatoes. Other houses they charge from 50 cents up. They just collect it without the circle. They start to play on Wednesday afternoon. They play in the evening too. Thursday some of them don't 3 play because they got to prepare for Friday — Mrs. R. If they wouldn't have to see their husbands they would play all the time. Mr. R Sure they got to see their husbands to collect the pay. Some houses they play all the time anyway. Listen. This is a true story. One man gave his wife 250 dollars to buy a fur coat. She was after him for that fur coat for a long time. So I suppose he got tired from being annoyed and he gave her the money. Anyway, she goes out with women what they play already a big game, a dollar and two, in a club they used to have here over the Automat. And I suppose these women they talk it in to her, you know, if she wins more money she'll be able to buy a better coat. I suppose that's how it was. So she goes to the club and her luck she gets wiped out every cent. You know how it is. Every woman got an enemy. So

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I suppose one goes to the husband and tells him. You can imagine. He called the police and they had to close the club up on account of that. Mrs. R. And a good thing too. A regular gambling place. You could lose there everything. Mr. R Here's another one what happened to a woman. A woman lost all her husband's wages in a kitty house. So when he came home she had to tell him something. So she told him that she thought the laundry man [took?] it. I suppose she figured the laundryman and laundryman comes into the house for the laundry so he could be a good one to take it. But the husband is no dope. He goes to the laundry man and gives him hell why he stole the money. Mrs. R. And what about the man that lost his wages in a game and he didn't come home for three days. He was afraid his wife would throw him out of the house. Mr. R I suppose he wasn't to blame so much. You know a man gets 4 his wages. The wife she must want this and that so he wanted to double his money. So he lost it instead. It was just his hard luck. And suppose he won? Ah? Then it is all right. But that's cards. I suppose he didn't know how to play so good either. The one where I play the woman is sick you know and she's a widow. You got to give her a break. Mrs. R Some hostesses, I know one she is my customer. (To Mr. R. who was about to give her name) Sh — you don't have to mention her name. She gave her husband the gate and she got a lover. Most of them yes. Mr. R Where I play by my cousin, is not like that. A poor woman. She makes a few dollars. Some places after two o'clock you pay for electric again. Some play until 4 and 5 in the morning. They pull down the shades. They have a fight once in a while. In a fight one woman called another woman a name. You know. Mrs. R. Not a nice name. Well — (laughing) a whore, like you would say. So the other one says, I am an open book. But you, you are the one. You have a husband and you — At least everybody knows about me. Mr. R They play all kinds of stakes. In every house is different. 2cents and four. Some five and ten. Most of the women have grown up children. Husbands? All kinds. Some doctors, some poor workers, all kinds. Yes, everybody smokes and they talk all the time. About the game. Some houses have laws on the wall. (At this point a customer came in and Mr. R invited me into the kitchen to give me tea and more information) You want to know about the laws. One is that you must raise a pair or you don't get your money. That is because there are some players

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what they are looking for suckers. The main thing in cards is bluffing. Everybody likes a bluffer. The ones who have the goods and they lay back till the last to raise they don't like.

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Kitty houses they started from the travelling games. A bunch of wmen used to play and then somebody I suppose took out for the food and then somebody else did it and like that it got to be a business. You know (confidentially) there is cheating sometimes too. There was a couple, a doctor and his wife. They always won. They had signals. In some places they have marked cards. Once I went into a card party, a sociable not a kitty house and I met a feller. Then once I met the same feller in a resturant and I invited him to come to my house and play cards. So he came over with a friend and we play and they clean me out. They brought their own deck and they win all the time. So I don't say anything but I am suspicious on them and so I invite them to come again on the next day. So they come again and they bring again their own deck. So I ask them why they are so nice that they bring [their?] own deck? We play and they clean me out again. Every time I have the the goods they know it and they drop out. Every time I bluff they know it and they see me. So I was sure they are cheaters. But I didNt know how. So after the game I say to them to let me keep the cards. They don't want me to keep them but I said I wanted the cards and they go away. Then it took me a long time but I found out how they mark the cards. You want to see I'll show you. (Mr. R. then demonstrated how the cards were marked by taking a card from a deck and using a knife to erase a line on one of the small units in the pattern on the back of the card. By erasing different little lines it was possible to tell a card from some distance, yet it was would have been quited quite difficult to spot the card as marked without close examination. The marking was apparently harmless and could be considered a flaw in the pattern.) Yes, they talk numbers too. Most of the women play the numbers. Well, my cousin, she makes maybe thirty or forty dollars a week. And you want to know something, most of the men they need a woman they can get 6 them in a Kitty house. There not They're not professionals in these houses, amateurs. They need the money to play. I'll tell you something. The women are even more crooke bigger crooks than the

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men. (All this in a low confidential tone) Look at this. (Mr. R showed me an a featured article in the Yiddish paper "The Day". The article was captioned "The women of New York alone gamble away over six hundred million dollars a year") Read that if you think the kitty houses is something. Read that about the horses.